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Understanding unintentional plagiarism and international students' approaches to academic reading: a participatory approach to researching the international student experience

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Summary

This project aimed to investigate international student approaches to reading and source-use in preparation for a written assignment as part of a commitment to identifying the learning needs of students undertaking independent learning tasks outside of the university classroom. To date, student literacies and plagiarism avoidance support have focused almost exclusively on writing practices and authorial identity. This study, therefore, sought to explore student approaches to reading as the basis for developing recommendations for the better support of all students engaging in researching and reading for assessment. The project also sought to pilot a collaborative approach to the scholarship of learning and teaching by engaging students as co-researchers in the data collection, analysis and dissemination of the project outcomes.

Ten undergraduate students studying in English as a second language in a research-intensive UK institution participated in a collaborative study of their source-identification, reading and source-use practices. The students were studying in a range of disciplines – Medicine, Humanities, Social Sciences and Sciences. Students collated reading materials including journal articles, books and website resources, as the basis for a semi-structured reading interview exploring their conceptions of reading for the purposes of writing, task representation of written assessment and understanding of inappropriate source use and plagiarism. Thematic analysis of transcribed interviews and student annotation practices during reading identified two dimensions underpinning student reading approaches – task representation of reading for writing and conception of reader-author identity.

In addition, evaluation of the student-researcher collaboration during data analysis, conference dissemination and writing has identified a series of issues related to expertise, power, motivation and authority that are central to better understanding and theorising student engagement activities in higher education research.

Aims and objectives

- To explore international student approaches to reading and source-use in preparation for a written assignment as the basis for developing recommendations for the better support of international students engaging in researching and reading for assessment (to date, student literacies and plagiarism avoidance support have focused almost exclusively on writing practices and authorial identity).
- To pilot a collaborative approach to the scholarship of learning and teaching by engaging students as co-researchers in the data collection, analysis and dissemination of the project outcomes.

Approach

Institutional ethics approval was sought but the collaborative nature of the research project involving students as co-researchers posed challenges for ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of student participants during the research and dissemination and led to a delayed start. Student participants were finally recruited by institutional research recruitment email.

This resulted in 40 student applications shortlisted to 15 students based on eligibility and student area of study to ensure breadth of sample. Ultimately 10 students progressed through the full term of the project. Interview data collection was completed and two data analysis meetings were held. The delay in the start date of the project had a number of consequences:

- The evaluation by focus group could not be conducted face-to-face as the majority of the students had returned to their home countries after the university examination period. An alternative online asynchronous focus group was conducted with students asked to evaluate their motivation for participation, their experience of participating in data collection, perceived benefits of participation and perception of influence on the research.
- The delivery of some outputs within the project period – for example much data analysis and interpretation was contemporaneous with the start of the dissemination process.
- Overlapping of the project with the student examination period which directly resulted in the withdrawal of one student from the study.

An initial matrix model was developed during data analysis to map the different conceptions of reading. This model of conception of reading and authorial identity can be used to scaffold student reflection about their reading and reading-to-write practices. Preliminary feedback during conference dissemination suggested that this could be a useful tool but that this model still needed to be refined and tested with staff and students. This was undertaken in two ways:

- The matrix was presented and evaluated in planned workshops with academic staff and their feedback was utilised to develop it further as a resource.
- The tool was subsequently developed as an interactive self-assessment tool on the project website for students to answer questions and map their approach against case examples. This included an opportunity for students to evaluate it.

A fundamental outcome of the project was a shift in the emphasis of the project in relation to student collaboration in the scholarship of learning and teaching. Whilst student engagement was initially a subsidiary part of the project, this aspect of the study expanded significantly as a direct result of the process of working more collaboratively with students. The literature review phase of the project was used to explore more of the research and case examples available in relation to students as co-researchers and students as change agents in UK and US contexts. In particular the book by Werder and Otis (Eds.) *Engaging Student Voices in the Study of Teaching and Learning* proved influential in thinking about student roles in research and co-authorship in scholarship of learning and teaching. This in turn influenced a number of the outputs – with one conference presentation and two publications now linked to this aspect of the project – and led to acceptance into a collaborative international writing group on students as change agents.

The outcomes of this collaboration with students in pedagogic research also informed the development of an ongoing project engaging students as pedagogic consultants in professional development funded by the Society for Research in Higher Education. The study on collaboration with Dr Camille Kandiko, King's College London "Students as co-developers of learning and teaching: Redefining expertise and student voice through student participation in professional development" will report in March 2014 and further information on the study is available from:

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/research/sl-partnership/students-as-co-developers.aspx>

[Accessed February 2014]

Outputs

Conference papers

- S. Weller (2012) Authorising the student voice in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL): Students as co-researchers in researching reading-to-write practices, International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), 23-27 October, Hamilton, Canada
- S. Weller (2012) "The one who writes is the same as the one who reads": Textual annotation, plagiarism and international students' approaches to reading, 5th International Plagiarism Conference, 16-18 July, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK,

(http://archive.plagiarismadvice.org/documents/conference2012/finalpapers/Weller_fullpaper.pdf)
[Accessed January 2014].

- S. Weller, G. Domarkaite & C. Lam (2012) Supporting international students' approaches to reading: The outcomes of a student-lecturer collaborative project, 6th Excellence in Teaching Conference, 22 June, King's College London, London, UK.
- S. Weller (2012) International students' reading practices: an alternative focus for understanding unintentional plagiarism?, ASKe 6th Institutional Policies and Procedures for Managing Student Plagiarism Event, 14 June, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/Plagiarism%202012/SaranneWeller_PlagWorskhop_June2012.pdf
[Accessed January 2014].

Journal articles

- P. Felten, J. Bagg, M. Bumbry, J. Hill, K. Hornsby, M. Pratt & S. Weller (2013) A call for expanding inclusive student engagement in SoTL, *Teaching and Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal*, 1(2): 63-74.
- S. Weller, G. Domarkaite, C. Lam and L. Metta (2013) Student-faculty co-inquiry into student reading: Recognising SoTL as pedagogic practice, *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 7(2): 1-16 <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1394&context=ij-sotl>
[Accessed January 2014].

Impacts

The evaluation of the project using an online focus group identified a number of important learning outcomes that demonstrated the direct enhancement of the student learning experience for participating students which was an objective of the study. The majority of the participating students indicated that their participation in the project had improved their understanding of their reading practices and helped them to explore the dimensions of the assessment tasks they had been completing. Example comments from the participating students were:

- "I have actually become more aware of my own style and perhaps where I can improve on";
- "the research made me think about questions I have never thought of before, like why I read books and whether I am reading in the right way. I feel more assured of what I am expected when writing essays and reading books";
- "the project helped me realise how I write an essay which might be useful when writing the next essay";
- "by participating the study, my view on what is plagiarising became clearer. I only had a vague, unsure view before".

Participating students also commented on the opportunities that the collaborative nature of the project provided including for some students opportunities to co-present at the institutional learning and teaching conference and to co-author a paper.

Through dissemination activities there is evidence that the outcomes of the project have had an impact on the support given to academic staff to improve the student experience.

Implications for the student learning experience

A fundamental outcome of the project, aligned to the Students as Partners theme of the Higher Education Academy, is the strand of the project related to student participation in enhancement activities and pedagogic research. While a significant opportunity to challenge and rethink the relationship between students and their institutions, it is only now beginning to be more extensively theorised in the context of the UK sector. The project methodology involving students as co-researchers identified several issues in relation to student collaboration:

- institutional understanding and ethics frameworks for undergraduate students as co-researchers;
- implementation and timing of project activities in relation to student programmes of study;
- student participant expectations and anticipated outcomes of co-research;
- enabling inclusive engagement with students as co-researchers;
- co-research activities as a co-curricula activity with pedagogic implications.

These issues have significant implications for future involvement of students in co-research and enhancement partnerships. One concern is the tokenistic involvement of students in student partnerships that are potentially tacitly or explicitly seeking to domesticate rather than empower student voice within pedagogic research and enhancement practices.

These issues have been articulated through the published outputs from this project, particularly as these relate to power and expertise in research and inclusive approaches to student partnership. It is recognised that institutional structures can maintain and reproduce existing dominant power relations (Mann, 2008). We therefore need to be cognisant, when seeking to mainstream student partnership in enhancement activities, of the ways in which student participation can reinforce rather than critique or replace existing power structures between students, staff and institutions. The outcomes for students from participation in such a project can vary significantly, for example, enabling those who already have academic capital to build and enhance this while continuing to marginalise or silence other voices. Future student engagement work needs to take further account of inclusive or critical pedagogies within student partnership work if this is to impact on all student experience and have genuinely transformational outcomes for higher education.

References and other resources

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